

□ Reading time: 4 min.

*Don Bosco with the missionaries of the second Salesian missionary expedition, Turin, 1876.*

*From his early years as a priest, Don Bosco harboured a deep missionary desire, convinced that spreading the Gospel was paramount for building the Kingdom of God. Though held back in Turin by his mentor Fr. Cafasso, he began the Oratory and founded the Salesian Society with missionary purposes. His famous “missionary dreams,” experienced between 1872 and 1886, revealed territories in Patagonia, Latin America, Africa, and China, outlining the global expansion of the Congregation. Through prophetic texts and spiritual visions, Don Bosco traced the Salesians’ vocation toward the neediest youth, laying the foundation for work that would soon materialize even in the Far East.*

From his early days as a young cleric, Don Bosco thought about missions. His knowledge of Church history reminded him of its efforts to spread the Gospel and sharpened his desire to devote all his strength to building God’s Kingdom on earth. Ordained a priest in 1841 and entering Turin’s Ecclesiastical College under Fr. Giuseppe Cafasso’s guidance, he was driven by two main desires: caring for poor and abandoned youth and the urge to depart for the missions. Advised by Fr. Cafasso not to consider leaving for mission lands himself, he began his Oratory in Turin, nurtured ecclesiastical and religious vocations, and founded the Salesian Society, which was to be a missionary Congregation.

From 1849 onward, his successor in leading the Salesians, young Michele Rua, heard him exclaim repeatedly:

— *Oh, if I had twelve priests at my disposal, how much good could be done (MB III, 546).*

After forming the first core of Salesians in 1859, his interest in the missions grew to

the point of speaking about it more frequently and studying maps to identify territories untouched by evangelization. Once the Salesian Society received definitive legal recognition in 1869, Don Bosco never lost sight of the missionary issue. After 1874, he had no doubts about the Salesian Society's missionary destiny. Requests for foundations in Asia, America, and Africa soon multiplied (MB IT X, 920.1063.1267-1268).

## **The Missionary Dreams**

Providence provided him with significant guidance through five major missionary dreams from 1872 to 1886. The first was about Patagonia, the second and third about various Latin American nations, the fourth about Africa and China, and the last was like an overview of the Congregation's missionary development worldwide, from Valparaíso to Beijing.

Were these visions? Don Bosco was a grand dreamer. With his imagination, he saw the entire apostolic field destined by the Lord for his missionaries, viewing it with the enthusiasm of a believer and the zeal of an apostle. We cannot too easily reduce his dreams to mere pedagogical devices. Yet, in Don Bosco's missionary dreams, it is wise to distinguish possible human elements from divine inspirations.

The crucial part of his dreams is their overarching theme and message. The environmental details, which might stem from prior knowledge or Don Bosco's vivid imagination, are secondary. But these dreams undeniably hold immense spiritual value, recognizable in their general theme. Historian Fr. Carlo Socol, a missionary in China, summarizes their message in three elements:

1. The salvation of souls as the mission's priority and purpose (*"Da mihi animas"*).
2. The Salesians' preferential option for poor youth in need of evangelization.
3. The characteristics of Salesian missionary work: labour and temperance (*"Caetera tolle"*).

## **Don Bosco's Testament and Two Dreams About China**

In what was called Don Bosco's Spiritual Testament, we read:

*"In due time, our missions will reach China, specifically Beijing. But let us not forget that we go for poor and abandoned children. There, among peoples unknown and ignorant of the true God, wonders hitherto unbelieved will be seen, which Almighty God will reveal to the world" (Piccola Biblioteca dell'ISS n. 4, p. 59).*

In 1885, Don Bosco had a dream revealing God's plans for the distant future. He recounted it on July 2 to his General Council members. He was taken on a journey to central Africa, the "land of Ham," and the "lands of Arphaxad."

This enigmatic Arphaxad is mentioned in Genesis 10. In his *Church History*, Rohrbacher asserted that the Chinese descended from Arphaxad. Don Bosco concluded it must refer to China.

In a later dream in Barcelona on the night of April 9–10, 1886, Don Bosco saw the Chinese territory again—specifically a large city crossed by a river with several large bridges: Beijing!

Strictly speaking, Beijing is not by a river. Aside from a small stream with five little bridges, a modern aqueduct, and an artificial lake, there are no rivers. A river lies outside the city, 30 km away, with the famous marble "Marco Polo Bridge." The Yellow River is far from there. Yet, despite this uncertain detail, China was clearly on Don Bosco's mind.

But the Shepherdess, guiding him as in his dream at nine years of age, encouraged him:

*— Do not be troubled. Your sons, the sons of your sons, and their sons will do this; but they must remain steadfast in observing the rules and the spirit of the Congregation.*

*— But where to find so many people? How to send missionaries there?*

*— Look—the Shepherdess replied. Be of good will: there is one thing to do—recommend that my children constantly cultivate the virtues of Mary.*

*— Well, yes, I think I understand! —Don Bosco replied.*

## **Dreams Become Reality**

The Salesian work in China began in 1906, with Fr. Luigi Versiglia, two other priests, and three lay members of the Salesian family. The martyrdom of Bishop Versiglia and Fr. Callisto Caravario in 1930 became seed of Christians.

Thus, examining the essence of Don Bosco's dreams, we can already see much of their fulfilment. Don Bosco was an inspired dreamer, a visionary bold enough to undertake seemingly impossible missionary endeavours. His boundless trust in Divine Providence and heroic response to God's call opened vast horizons of the Gospel of Christ Our Lord to his sons!